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Emilio Lucio-Villegas

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Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci's contributions to adult education¹

Emilio Lucio-Villegas

University of Seville, Spain, elucio@us.es

Abstract

This time is characterised by the policies and practices of Lifelong Learning. Against this process of dehumanisation, it could be important to 'revisit' some authors that enlighten us on how to recuperate an emancipatory adult education, valuable for developing critical thinking about the daily life of individuals and/or communities. In this direction, Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci offer us some interesting ideas. Even though they both lived in different countries and in different historic moments, they hold some common points related to a definite view of adult education. I am going to focus on three: the role of the educator, the notion of hegemony and the culture(s). In the conclusions, I will reflect on the contribution of these two thinkers to break the hegemonic view that seems to have reduced adult education to a marginalised niche. Reflecting on their contributions, mostly related to the role of the educator and the notion of culture as the core of adult education, it could be possible to recuperate the emancipatory power of adult education.

Keywords: adult education, critical awareness, culture, educator, hegemony.

1. Introduction

Lifelong Learning cannot be considered a theory, or a new knowledge; it is a whole corpus of policies, regulations and practices developed which has homogenised and reduced - in the framework of the neoliberal agenda - the rich European tradition of a diverse adult education to a learning focused on providing some skills to an individual only considered as a worker and consumer. From the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (EU, 2000), the education to achieve a rich and productive social life, to become a citizen, for becoming a person, has been lost in the mainstream of the necessities of manpower for private companies. Perhaps, it could be interesting to reflect and establish links between these policies and the growing significance of fascist parties in some countries in Europe, the increase of xenophobia, the negation of the Holocaust, and the abandon of an education that enables people to confront and understand the challenges of a changing society.

One of the major characteristics of Lifelong Learning is related to the shift in the main objectives of the educational policies. In 'A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' (EU, 2000) one of the goals was defined as "promoting active citizenship and promoting employability [as] equally important and interrelated aims for lifelong learning" (p. 4). Seven years later, the document 'It is always a good time to learn' affirmed: "A key element of the agenda proposed in Lisbon [the document previously cited] was the promotion of employability and social inclusion through investment in citizens' knowledge and competences at all stages of their lives" (EU, 2007, p. 2).

¹ This article is based on a paper presented to the online conference 'Adult Education in Global Times' celebrated in June 2021.

Language is a form of hegemony, and it is possible to analyse how words such as citizenship, education or educator – now they are alluded to as practitioners, counsellors, etc. – are not present in the documents referring to Lifelong Learning. On the contrary, we witness the use of an entrepreneurial language in the field of education. New words such as investment, skills, competences, are now present in the discourse. As Lima (2000) states:

In education, managerial speeches have been occupying the position which was previously assumed by educational theories and pedagogical thinking, building narratives of managerial type that legitimise a new social order based on the market and in the private and productive sectors, in the economic competition, and in the client-centred management. (p. 243)

Two more ideas seem to be important in defining the current state of adult education in Europe. On the one hand, policies and practices of Lifelong Learning have reduced the diversity of adult education – that is one of its characteristics (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, Gelpi, 2004). The last affirmed: “Adult education in Europe seems to have progressively forgotten its history made of fighting, resistances and creativity, and have transformed it into an instrument of power only used for individual development and the logic of the market” (Gelpi, 2004, p. 153).

On the other, it is important to stress that the aims of education are now situated in the labour market. As Dewey ([1916] 1995) pointed out, learning and teaching are not mere resources. The aims of education must be education itself and not external objectives.

In this scenario, and taking into account an educational model that is shaping the whole thought on adult education, it could be important to reassess some of the key ideas of these two intellectuals and reflect on their contributions to (re)consider adult education as a tool for emancipation.

To approach their contributions, I am going to focus on three concepts: the role of the educator, the concept of hegemony in helping create a social consensus, and, finally, culture(s). In some ways, the three – above all the last two – are interconnected. After this, I will present two experiences that enlighten us on the possibilities of another adult education. Finally, I will point out some contributions of both to recuperate an adult education committed to the development of people and communities.

2. Exploring Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci

Raymond Williams was born in Pandy, Wales in 1921. He was an adult educator, university teacher and novelist. In fact, his most famous novel, ‘Border Country’, is a kind of autobiography. His father was a railway worker - a signaller. He attended classes from elementary school to university. After he served in the British army during the Second World War, he became a staff tutor and worked for the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) until he joined the University of Cambridge where he became Professor of Modern Drama. He died in 1988.

Antonio Gramsci was born in Sardinia in 1891. This was a rural environment marked by a high level of illiteracy and superstition. Gramsci went to Torino to study in the University and he joined cultural and worker movements. Torino was – in that moment – the most important industrial city in Italy, and the birthplace of the working-class movement in the country, because of FIAT. He experienced the Russian Revolution and the defeat of the working class

in Italy. Reflecting on this defeat, Gramsci edified his political theory. He was incarcerated by the fascist regime and, after being released from prison, died in 1937.

2.1 The Educator

According to Gramsci, there are two different types of intellectuals. 'Traditional intellectuals' – for instance, priests, but also teachers - are intellectuals "employed in the service of the dominant forces" (Coben, 1995, p. 42). They represent the traditional world of landlords and rural society. A second category are the 'organic intellectuals', considered necessary for establishing the most favoured conditions for expanding the thinking of their social class. The 'organic intellectual' is a master in organising social life and legitimation. Organic intellectuals are builders of thought, either for the bourgeois or for the working class.

However, it is important to clarify that, even for Gramsci, every person is an intellectual, but only some of them hold this role in society. These people, with the role of intellectuals, are those who are renovating both the social and physical world and building a new concept of it.

Two powerful ideas emerge. On the one hand, if every person is an intellectual, this means that everybody can reflect and understand the surrounding world. Second, is the fact that the 'organic intellectual', as mentioned above, shapes the world and, in some ways, creates the meanings through which people perceive their world. Giroux (1990) – among others - has developed the notion of the educators as 'transformative intellectuals' that is linked to democratic schools. One of the aims of this 'transformative intellectual' is to empower the students to critically interpret the world and change it.

In 'An Open Letter to WEA Tutors', Raymond Williams starts by affirming that his work as an adult educator "has been a good job, but always, as for most tutors, it has been more than a job" ([1961] 1993, p. 222). This 'more than a job' is to maintain "the organisation of social justice, and the institutions of democracy" (p. 223). To achieve this social justice in the background of democracy, people "should be highly educated" (p. 223).

In connection to Gramsci's affirmation that every person is an intellectual, and referring to WEA, Williams considered that adult education "stands for an educated democracy, not for a newly mobile and more varied elite" ([1961] 1993, p. 223). In some ways, Williams also believed that every person is a philosopher, holding knowledge. "I have discussed D.H. Lawrence with working miners; discussed methods of arguments with building workers; discussed newspapers with young trade unionist; discussed television with apprentices in training [...] I have learned as much as I taught" (Williams, [1961] 1993, p. 224).

What could be the methodology used for an educator such as that proposed by either Williams or Gramsci? Both agree that it should be a method that potentiates critical awareness. To Williams, focused on the teaching of literature to adult learners, the educator has to be more concerned with developing "their powers of understanding and discrimination in what they heard and what they read [to engage the learners in a] richer social participation and improved a more vigorous popular culture" (McIlroy, 1993, p. 288). And this can only be done if "the tutor becomes far more passive and the class more active and study-centred" (Ibid.).

To Gramsci, focused on the political education, the educator is a creator of counter-hegemony. This building can be organised in different sites of social practices that can be transformed in sites of adult learning: workplace, cultural centres, or even in prison. But education is always an attempt to organise critical political awareness and to improve basic education for all (Mayo, 2010).

2.2 Hegemony

If adult educators are 'organic intellectuals' helping to both build and critically analyse the surrounding environment, it is important to say something about the building of the representation of the world, and how this construction sculpts the mentality of common people. This is the role of the hegemony. According to Williams (1977),

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology', not are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as 'manipulation' or 'indoctrination'. It is a whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves, and our world. (p. 110)

Hegemony is always a process, and this idea of process allows us to add and confront other processes that also shape our perceptions in a different way: the emergent and alternative hegemonies, usually called counter-hegemonies.

Important here is the fact that individuals "always take part in a specific social group, precisely that one where people are sharing a same approach of both thinking and acting" (Gramsci, 1974b, p. 365). Thus, the process of building a hegemonic thought means to create a concept of life, choose a sphere of activity, and "participate actively in the creation of the history of the world" (Gramsci, 1974a, p. 62). Gramsci considered that hegemony means a permeation in society of an entire system of values, attitudes, etc., that have the mission of supporting the dominant power relations in each historic moment (Burke, 1999, 2005) or facilitating the changes in a specific society in a particular historical moment.

According to Gramsci, hegemony is a form of cultural direction, "ruling by consent and not simply through force" (Mayo, 2010, p. 22). Hegemony could be observed in a very clear manner in the case of language that I already mentioned in the introduction. In this sense, it can be affirmed that culture(s) and hegemony are closely connected to the building – or not – of a democratic society. As Williams (1984) affirmed:

If man [sic] is essentially a learning, creating and communicating being, the only social organization adequate to his nature is a participating democracy in which all of us, as unique individuals, learn, communicate and control. Any lesser, restrictive system is simply wasteful of our true resources; in wasting individuals, by shutting them out from effective participation, it is damaging our true common process (p. 118).

The most important derivation from the idea of hegemony is that, for Gramsci – but also for Williams – politics is a form of pedagogy: "To take power without violence is only possible when the proletariat have finished the work of technical preparation and social education that it would be the revolutionary method" (Gramsci & Bordiga, 1977, p. 111).

2.3 Culture(s)

It could be considered the major concept in either Gramsci's or Williams' works, and it is connected to hegemony. In fact, I think that it is the central concept to an adult education that aspires emancipation. According to Williams, we have to talk about cultures in plural. Quoting Herder, he stated: "Is then necessary [...] to speak of 'cultures' in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation" (1985, p. 89).

Gramsci differentiated between low and high culture and considered that low culture could be a form of domination. As Diaz Salazar (1991) states,

Folklore, understood as an idea of the world and of the life of common people in society, is made singular because of its opposition and counter-opposition to the 'cult', 'official' and hegemonic idea of a specific society, and because of its non-systematic, contradictory and politically disorganised character (p. 153).

Another concept common to both authors is popular culture. Diaz Salazar (1991), following Gramsci, considers that “Popular culture is the starting point for the development of a new political awareness [...]. This process demands an appropriate pedagogy and wants to consider the progressive elements of the culture, and the creative popular soul” (p. 160). Ultimately, as Williams affirmed, “Popular culture [...] presenting knowledge in generally accessible ways” (1985, p. 23).

Gramsci also differentiated between common sense and good sense. ‘Common sense’ holds contradictory elements. But, in Gramsci’s conception, also contains elements of ‘good sense’ in a distorted and fragmentary view of the world. It is a conception of the world, which is developed and absorbed uncritically (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002).

Finally, it is important to stress that, for Gramsci,

Creating a new culture does not mean one’s individual ‘original’ discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their ‘socialisation’ as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order (In Mayo, 2010, p. 31).

Are these contributions present in the ‘real’ world? What experiences can enlighten us in this direction? I am going to describe a historic experience related to culture – *The Misiones Pedagógicas* – and a current micro-experience related to the recovery of the memory of people in their own neighbourhood.

2.3.1 The ‘Misiones Pedagógicas’

Tiana (2021) defined this experience with the following words:

In Spain, between the years of 1931 to 1936 an original and interesting popular educational experience was developed. Some people, mainly younger, most of them connected with teaching activities, together with writers and artists, went across Spain bringing books, music, copies of paintings, projectors, films, plays, and puppets to places and villages, some of them still very isolated. In these places, they organised exhibitions, theatres, teaching keynotes, public sessions of reading, they worked and played with children and their teachers, and lived together with villagers. After some days, they returned to their homes after planting the seeds of education and culture, as well as leaving books and records in the schools. This lasted for a five-year period and in different seasons of the year (p. 15).

There is no better explanation of this process. The same author refers to the methodology of the experience that he names ‘recreational school’ to stress that it was opened to a diversity of cultural events and activities to break the isolation of Spain’s hinterland.

This diversity of activities can be summarised as follows (Tiana, 2021): i) the study of the natural environment through keynotes, exhibitions, etc.; ii) the ‘socialisation’ of fine arts with exhibitions of copies of great paintings; iii) the organisation of public readings and listening to music – popular and classic, live or on records, iv) the use of the cinema; v) citizenship

education focused on people's rights and the principles of the republic; vi) activities to encourage people to read, mainly by the organisation of public libraries in small villages; and viii) actions devoted to teacher training.

Participation in the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' was not only of those related to education. We can highlight individuals such as the poet Luis Cernuda, the philosopher Maria Zambrano or the playwright Alejandro Casona, among others. Most of them went into exile when the fascists won the Civil War, and the dictatorship began.

Finally, it can be affirmed that the 'Misiones Pedagógicas' presented a triple dimension. First, by defining a specific model of education and practice, as I already mentioned; second, because it was a great effort in terms of cultural action and communication; and third, it carried a strong political implication to reinforce democracy and the Republic (Tiana, 2021).

2.3.2 The workshop for recovering the historic memory

This is the work done by a group of adult learners that are recovering the memory of the people retaliated by the dictatorship. It is done in the scope of the history of their own neighbourhood and the whole country.

The workshop started functioning in 2004 by collecting life stories of repression, incomplete education, precarious jobs, poverty, or migration. López Luna (2011) considers that the defining moment for the beginning was an interview with a woman that had lost her father at the very beginning of the Civil War, when she was only 5 years old. She expressed her nervousness and difficulties in conveying her memories and feelings related to those years.

The workshop - organised and managed by adult learners - has developed three different research projects. The first was focused on collecting histories from people living in the time of the Spanish Civil War, and the early years of the dictatorship. 10 interviews were done and organised around three main generative themes: a) repression either in the Civil War or during the dictatorship, b) education, and c) work in the post-war period. Dissemination was done in public presentations – in some cases it was the first time that some of these persons talked in public - in diverse places: adult education schools, secondary schools, community centres and the university. Audio-visual material was organised to systematise these public presentations.

The second research was undertaken by collecting 14 life stories. They are related to the last years of the dictatorship and the period known as *La transición*: the process of recuperating democracy between 1975 – the death of the dictator – to 1978 – when the democratic constitution was enacted. The generative themes that arose during a dedicated process of organising and analysing the interviews were: a) the processes of migration – a consequence of the previous research, b) the first massive workers' strikes, c) the birth of democratic trade unions (even in the age of the dictatorship), d) the social and political militancy either in clandestine political parties, or in the first neighbourhood associations, and e) the condition of women. Dissemination of this research started with a public presentation in a community theatre in the district. Then, it was presented in diverse places, as mentioned above.

At present, the workshop is involved in new research related to one of the most important textile factories in the city. This factory is also significant to the history of the district and in the history of the workers' movement in the city.

According to López Luna (2011) there are a variety of achievements emerging from the research process. On the one hand, participants in the workshop were enabled to acquire

some learning on how to conduct research. Another achievement is related to the acquisition of tools for expressing themselves orally. For instance, their public presentations showed them how to communicate their research findings. Also, they employed creativity when preparing the public presentation by including music and poetry.

3. Conclusions

After these experiences, that can be related to the key subjects presented in the article, I will focus on two major ideas to delineate Williams and Gramsci's contributions for adult education.

Culture is the core of adult education. The problem, sometimes, is that popular culture - the culture that common people hold - could be more an element of alienation than liberation. This is the case of the magical awareness described by Freire (1970): a system of beliefs that maintain people in a state of alienation and does not allow them to explain the surrounding world. Gramsci considered that popular culture is, sometimes, full of superstition and, for that, does not let people to create an alternative hegemony. It has to be distilled from these elements of superstition.

In this direction, the concept of criticism drawn on by Williams could be a response to. Starting from the culture of common people, it improves the understanding of the surrounding reality. According to Williams, criticism is a conscious reaction "including, as often as necessary, positive or negative responses, a definitive practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context" (1985, p. 86). As Welton (1982) states, it is the possibility to think about things beyond the simple collection of data.

It is important not to forget that culture is a symbolic structure that enables people to understand and to be situated in the world (Geertz, 1987). According to Cole (2008), the most important lesson for educators, deriving from Williams' thought, is their deep and continuous emphasis that he placed upon culture as both a constitutive element of society as a potential means for organising social transformation.

Against the hegemonic idea – due to the policies and practices of Lifelong Learning – that the educator is simply an accompanying person, it is compulsory, and urgent, to recover the notion of an educator that helps and supports people. Freire (1984) said that we can differentiate between different type of educators only by the use that they make of a slide projector. The concept of 'organic intellectual' is very useful here. First because, as Williams affirmed, organic as itself, "indicated certain kinds of relationship" (1985, p. 227). Second, because he or she is a person that elaborates the ideas of their social group. Intellectuals are not neutral; they address important issues concerning private and social life and they choose some options and not others in a process plenty of ethical elements.

Both Williams and Gramsci are committed to the education of the working class. Instead of the obsession with a training for a job, both consider that an educated working-class is the guarantee of democracy. The last summarised this idea:

The system of workers democracy... would shape and discipline the masses, would be a fantastic school of political and administrative experience, would be the framework of the masses, building in them the habit of tenancy and perseverance, building in the masses the habit of considering themselves an army in the battlefield, in need of a strong cohesion if it does not want to be destroyed and reduced to slavery (Gramsci & Bordiga, 1977, p. 70).

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